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Reconstructing woman: From Fiction to Reality in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel. By

DOROTHY KELLY. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. viii +

178 pp. Pb \$25.00.

The main theme of this book is certainly fascinating. Dorothy Kelly takes four male novelists – Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam – and shows how, in their novels, natural human reproduction is presented as somehow inadequate or distasteful. Alongside this dissatisfaction with the natural, she brings out figures of artificial reproduction, of wombs and of people created by art, by civilisation, or by a science that seems to promise a new and better humanity, from the mine of *Germinal* to the laboratory of Edison in *L'Eve future*, or from the imagination of Sarrasine to that of Frédéric Moreau. But, as she demonstrates, this new humanity, born of man rather than of woman, according to the laws of art and science, creates a 'crisis of distinction': differences such as those between humans, animals, and machines, which in the old natural order could be taken for granted, become highly problematic when humans are envisaged as the product of a mechanistic order or of a socio-linguistic activity. Unfortunately, this illuminating perspective is rather too often obstructed by inconsistencies in the argument. To take the most obvious example: in accordance with the title of her book, Kelly frequently presents her topic as the construction of artificial women. But in many of her examples, the offspring of artifice is male. The 'avorton' born of the mine in *Germinal* is a boy, Jeanlin, as is the product of experiment in Flaubert's *Quidquid Volueris*. The object of Charles Bovary's carefully analysed attempt at reconstruction, a new Hippolyte, is also masculine. Kelly presents Balzac's Vautrin as an 'action-poet' who attempts to reconfigure Esther as his own creation; she then observes that he does the same with a male character, Lucien, describing himself as Lucien's

mother, but fails to comment on the implications of the gender inversion. More seriously, she underplays, I think, the extent to which, for all these novelists, the masculine would-be creators, the Frankensteins or Pygmalions, can appear, in the end, less essential to the creation of life than women. *Les Rougon-Macquart* ends, after all, with the future saluted by a child born naturally of woman, after the death of the father who failed to control heredity by science. In *L'Eve future*, we eventually discover that all Edison's attempts to persuade Lord Ewald that he can fall in love with a pure creation of his science are based on a lie, for Hadaly actually comes to life for Ewald only thanks to a woman, Sowana, whom Edison frankly confesses he does not understand. It is, perhaps, precisely this limit to a technique presented as masculine that allows these novelists to maintain the possibility of a non-positivist creative impulse and sense of beauty. But to reach that limit of technique, in these novels, the alignment of humanity with the artificial, with the man-made, has to be pushed, precisely, to its limit; this book's value is in its analysis of that alignment.

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483 words